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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001020

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: SIGNS OF DEMOCRACY GROWING IN PARLIAMENT

Classified By: A/DCM Carol Rodley for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) There are increasing signs that Afghan Parliamentarians are growing into their roles and warming up to more democratic processes. Such signs include more actively exercising their oversight responsibilities, devising political (vs. personality-based) platforms, and trying to impose a degree of transparency into government operations. The Lower House recently convoked the Interior Minister to respond to impromptu questions about the security situation during plenary. This was Minister Zarar's first appearance and a positive sign of Parliament's growing confidence in its ability to exercise oversight of the executive branch. Shortly after, the Upper House held its first-ever "public awareness" session on security, where Ministers of the Interior and Defense, UNAMA Representative Chris Alexander, and COMISAF General McNeill responded to questions not only from MPs but also the public, including academics and NGOs. MP Faizullah Zaki's Uzbek-dominated Junbesh party, led by General Dostum, is working to democratize its operations, and a new political group, "Third Line", was recently created with a focus on a common liberal democrat party platform, as opposed to depending on a powerful personality to draw members. END SUMMARY.

Growing Oversight: Lower House Convokes Reluctant MOI

12. (SBU) On March 5, as a symbol of its growing oversight powers, Afghanistan's Lower House of Parliament convoked Interior Minister Muqbal Zarar to respond to impromptu questions on the security situation in the country during plenary. At first, it was not certain that Zarar was going to appear. He reportedly waited for almost two hours after arriving at Parliament before deciding to appear on the floor. In the past, MPs have complained bitterly about the MOI's lack of responsiveness to requests for information. MPs have recounted (unconfirmed) stories of not even being

allowed on the MOI compound by local guards. Calls made to Zarar's office reportedly go unreturned. Zarar's first appearance before the plenary signaled a turning point.

13. (SBU) Other Ministers who have appeared before the Wolesi Jirga include the Ministers of Finance, Defense, and the National Security Director. However, Zara's appearance was the first time that a Minister had been called in for extemporaneous questioning (as opposed to giving testimony or to observe debates, such as the national budget). Once before the plenary, Zarar protested that the questions posed to him should have been submitted in advance to give him the chance to prepare. He protested throughout the session that the MPs were not following proper protocol. (Note: Articles 91 and 92 of the Constitution give the Lower House authority to convoke a Minister. End Note.)

14. (SBU) Some of the MPs' questioning went to the heart of how the Government was handling security for the country. MPs asked Zarar if he agreed with Provincial Governor and Police Chief appointees currently in place. Zarar responded that, in general, he thought the appointees were doing well, although he did not agree with the appointments of some governors. He told the plenary that soon they would see a change in some governors, without naming anyone specifically.

(Note: The MOI nominates candidates for governor and the President approves the nomination. However, it is widely understood that the President selects the candidates for Governor. End Note.) Other MPs' questions focused on the MOI's general responsiveness and capabilities. When an MP asked about MOI's unresponsiveness to the cases it was investigating, the Minister replied that the MOI simply did not have the capacity to process the current caseload of 100

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cases a month. He pointed out that they were able to process 34, which they submitted to the Attorney General's office.

15. (SBU) The MPs also pressed Zarar for an answer on why security in the country was deteriorating, stressing that they would not accept a "diplomatic answer" that did not provide a real response. Zarar replied that Afghans needed to be patient and wait for police reform and training. He noted that "there will continue to be (security) problems" while this process was underway and stressed that the MOI had to build the ANP from nothing. The ANAP's presence in the South should be viewed as a success, he said. He said flat out that corruption was a "challenge within the GOA, since almost everyone was corrupt." Zarar told the MPs that his goals for the upcoming year beginning March 21 included tackling the high rate of drug use (he estimated over 1.5 million Afghans were addicted to heroin) because "it caused insecurity."

Upper House Holds Unprecedented "Public Awareness" Hearing

16. (SBU) On March 17, the Upper House Defense Committee Chairman MP Mohammad Arif Sarwari convoked not only the Minister of the Interior, but also the Minister of Defense General Abdul Wardak, UNAMA Representative Chris Alexander, and ISAF Commanding General McNeill to a "public awareness session on security." Sarwari, who chaired the event, invited Parliamentarians from the Lower House Defense Committee to attend the session. Representatives of the human rights community, professors from Kabul University, and numerous members of the media were also invited to this unprecedented event. The Parliamentarians, NGO representatives, and academics all asked questions of the panel. This was the first time that such a hearing was held with both houses as well as members of the public. It was also the first time that a Minister appeared before the Upper House. It lasted approximately four hours, focusing solely on security.

Political Party Strives to Reform, Democratize

¶7. (C) In a March 12 meeting with MP Faizullah Zaki, he explained that the Uzbek-dominated Junbesh party, led by General Dostum, was working to democratize its operations. The party planned to hold elections in 22 provinces April 16-21 to elect delegates to attend the third annual Junbesh Party Congress. For the first time, the Congress would be held in Kabul. Zaki noted that Junbesh was reaching out to hold elections in southern provinces that had not traditionally been a part of its northern power base (Dostum's core of support comes from the northwestern provinces. He is from Jowzjan province. End Note). Zaki explained that the Congress, which was scheduled for May 5-6, will vote for new leadership. While Dostum will remain the symbolic head of the party, he will not be running for election to its executive council. Dostum, he explained, understood that his 30 years of military experience might not be viewed as an asset as the group worked to gain recognition as a legitimate political party. Dostum has reportedly submitted his letter of resignation as head of the party, which will be made public.

¶8. (C) Zaki said the group was working to bring about "full democratization of the party and to make a break with the past." The new leadership will be elected via secret ballot. He said the party platform would also be revised but did not go into details. Zaki explained that the proposed changes in the draft electoral law (which is on the legislative schedule for this year) would increase the role of political parties in Parliament and Junbesh wants to be ready to capitalize on the opportunity. He said that Junbesh was trying to include non-Turkmen in the party by offering to include them on

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party lists for election.

New Political Group Based on Platform, Not Personality

¶9. (SBU) A new political group called "Third Line", made up of 15 MPs from different provinces and tribal backgrounds, was recently established. (Note: Due to the negative connotation that Afghans generally associate with political parties, which make them think of the Communist Party's involvement in Afghanistan, MPs generally prefer to form political "groups". It is also easier to form a group, because it does not need to be registered with the Ministry of Justice. End Note). "Third Line" is headed by Kabul MP Shukria Barakzai, and includes a range of MPs, including Gargashta Katawazi (from southern Paktika province), Ahmad Joyenda, Mohammed Ibrahim Qasimi, and Shinkai Karukhel (all from Kabul), Noor Akbari (Daikundi), Hashim Watanwal (Uruzgan), and Saliha Mirzad (Nimruz). The group was created based on its members' support for a liberal democratic platform, including such priority issues as the rule of law, ending privileges and amnesties for Jihadis, countering corruption, and promoting equal development for all provinces.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) These are all positive indicators that Afghan Parliamentarians are growing into in their roles and bringing more democratic processes to the fore in Parliament. MPs still regularly react emotionally to events as they occur, which can throw the legislative agenda off completely, especially if discussion is taken over by impassioned speeches about what MPs may have seen on television the night before. Despite the regular histrionics, there is real movement forward towards a more organized approach towards their work. Junbesh's party reforms to create a more

cohesive voting block in the Lower House is also a healthy sign that MPs are starting to work towards making the Parliamentary process work for them, as opposed to a scattered, individualistic approach, which was often characteristic of Parliament's first year of existence. The "Third Line" represents for the first time a group more focused on its platform than on the star power of its members. It remains to be seen if the Parliament is ready for such a group or whether the group will falter under the pressure of the powerful jihadis to whom most members are still loyal.

NEUMANN